

INSIDE OUTSIDE

HOMELESSNESS TO ME IS A REALITY I'VE HAD TO FACE FOR MORE THAN HALF MY LIFE.



Prison Network Ministries

I ended up on the streets before I was barely in my teens. While other girls my age were playing with dolls and having slumber parties, I was scouting the streets for a safe place to sleep and praying to God each night to please keep me safe for one more day. He must have listened because each morning I'd wake up alive and well. Because of my young age not many agencies could or were willing to help. I was even told once by Family Services that I "was not worth the paperwork".

I was, and still am, quite a resourceful and resilient young person. I kept to myself and didn't associate with any of the other people I met on the streets. I did this for two reasons: it kept me under the radar of people and more importantly the police, and I felt safer by myself. Occasionally I would stay at youth shelters but it wasn't long before I had a reputation that I didn't earn. I admit I was very angry and defensive with a very dry, quick wit, but I wasn't bad beyond help or whatever other label that was put on me.

Youth Shelters are good in a way but really, three months, if you don't end up being kicked out, is really not long enough. It's the same with temporary and short term housing. From the moment you move in you are wondering where you will move to or if you'll find somewhere to live when the time is up. I managed to avoid police contact while I was on the streets but ended up in the drug scene towards my later teenage years. I did continue my schooling whilst I was homeless and finished high school. I still remember doing my homework at 6am in the morning while waiting for my uniform to finish washing at the Laundromat. I used to use Laundromats and agencies that had washing machines, and showers were accessible through hotels we used to break into and transit centres. One of the habits I picked up was stealing. Stealing food; stealing money; stealing anything. I thought I was tough, that I didn't need anyone.

At one stage I found myself in a juvenile detention centre. Partly because I had nowhere to live, but mainly because I conjured a plan that I thought would make people help me once and for all out of my situation. It didn't go exactly as planned but in a twisted way I got what I wanted. I spent a few months



in the detention centre before they released me. They had contacted my family and the courts decided I was to return home. I would have preferred to stay in the detention centre. I begged and cried pleading with the judge to not make me go, but it didn't make a difference and that afternoon I was being driven to my so called home. Three days later I was gone again. Homelessness was my life and I accepted it. I did get some temporary housing a couple of times but no sooner had I moved in, it would be time to leave again, and private rentals are not even an option when you are on a youth allowance of \$300 a fortnight. The cycle continued for years but it didn't matter to me anymore. The streets had become a normal way of life to me, a daily routine that had become a habit.

With all the bad that happened, being on the streets was so much better than being at home with my family. I know that makes me sound like a spoilt brat but it's the truth. I realised at a young age that people would rather turn a blind eye and pretend than admit what is happening and cause waves. I also realised that no one was going to save me and I'd have to save myself. I used to dream of someone taking me away and living happily ever after. All I wanted was to be loved and to belong somewhere. The streets were the next best thing.

It wasn't until I fell pregnant that I was given proper housing help. For some reason being young, single and homeless doesn't rate high on accommodation and placement criteria lists with housing agencies or public housing, though the help didn't come without a fight. I'd been passed over and ignored for over 10 years on the streets but even having a child doesn't get you permanent accommodation. Through the help of a worker I was placed in a boarding house that I could afford. I was petrified that my child would be taken away from me because I knew that I would need proper accommodation before the child was born but wouldn't be able to afford it till after she was born.

CASE STUDY 1

Jenny was bailed from prison for a crime which she was later found...not guilty. It took 8 months for her to be reunited with her children. She was not eligible for any jail support housing assistance because she was only on bail. Furthermore, Jenny could not afford private rental in the area her children were attending school and any rental properties she applied for were rejected. Though she desperately wanted to be with them, Jenny was reluctant to move them in case she wasn't acquitted at court, in which case they would have to move again. After 8 months some friends allowed her and the children to move in with them. There were 4 adults and 2 children living in a 2 bedroom place. Eventually all charges against her were dropped.

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A NOTE FROM THE CEO



Welcome to another edition of Inside Outside.

As you are well aware, homelessness is a social problem of significant proportions in the Australian community. Those leaving custody typically face multiple disadvantages that leave them at a heightened risk of becoming homeless. Unless these disadvantages and accommodation

problems are addressed, many individuals leaving prison find their return to the community impossible to sustain, leading to high rates of re-offending and return to prison.

Prisoners and ex-prisoners have been found to have levels of social disadvantage well beyond that of the general community on a broad range of factors such as employment, education, family and social relationships and health.

For a number of women, their lack of stable ongoing and independent accommodation is contributing to them being unable to have access to their children or be able to establish meaningful relationships with them.

Late last year, The Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee released an Interim report that noted: "the most overwhelming problem identified by the Committee during the course of this Inquiry has been the lack of sufficient housing and accommodation options for women associated with the criminal justice system. Considerable evidence has been brought before the Committee which highlights the relationship between lack of housing, women's offending and re-offending."

We trust that from reading the articles in this edition of Inside Outside, it will stir your hearts to pray for us as we embark on addressing this issue.

Blessings,

Deb Redford

HOMELESSNESS TO ME IS A REALITY I'VE HAD TO FACE FOR MORE THAN HALF MY LIFE. (CONT.)

In my mid twenties I ended up in Dame Phyllis Frost Centre not long after my child was born. I was sentenced to a minimum of 2 years. My fear of my child being taken away came true even though I had accommodation. My past of being homeless and the few years of drug use was used against me. It didn't seem to matter it was in the past. Nothing mattered to me anymore. For the first time in my life being locked up was what I needed not wanted. I was angry when I first got there, angry that I did everything I was told to and they still took my child, and that once again I wasn't allowed to be happy. The longer I was there the more it helped me to reassess my situation. I still had my dreams and no one was going to stand in my way. I did my time by putting my head down and working. The more I worked the less time I had to think.

Before I knew it I was up for parole. I worked with people to help me find some accommodation, but it was the same story wherever we applied. I was very lucky as Department of Housing were not informed that I was in custody and my name stayed on the waiting list for the whole time I was in jail. I had an offer of housing a few weeks after I was first eligible for parole.

In my 28 years of life, I have spent 11 years on the streets, 2 years in total in various accommodations, and 2½ years in situations that I have come out the other side happy. I now live in permanent accommodation which has 2 bedrooms for when my daughter stays over. I have a long way to go with our relationship but every day brings new joy. I don't begrudge anyone for how my life turned out as it has helped me become who I am. I think I owe a lot of that to my time at DPFC and the people I met whilst I was there, but there are many people young and old still out there struggling and it could be me again as I've learnt never to take anything for granted.

Olivia

CASE STUDY 2

When Fiona was released from prison with nowhere to go, a housing agency paid for her to stay in a cheap motel for a few days. After this she was offered a boarding house in St Kilda. On arrival, 5 of the 7 people living there (who were all men) greeted her on the porch with a beer. The bin on the porch was filled to overflowing with cans and it was obvious they had all had more than a few. They showed her to her room which had nothing but a bed in it. Coming from an all female environment her 'over friendly' flat mates brought her to tears. Fiona was not one to normally cry but she was petrified, and with no lock on the door she knew there would be no way she could sleep. At 10 o'clock at night her fears were justified and we were forced to move her to yet another temporary situation. Boarding houses like this are commonly offered to women hoping to rebuild their lives. Also common, are rooming houses that accommodate up to 40 people who often suffer from mental illness; life controlling drug and alcohol problems; some who work as prostitutes; some who are part of gangs and some who can be very violent. Police raids, overdoses and fights are frequent occurrences. It is a very difficult environment in which to get your life on track.

CASE STUDY 3

Christine had never been in trouble with the police before but got caught up with some people who took advantage of her vulnerability. The result was a 3 year sentence. Her young daughter had nowhere to go when Christine was imprisoned so was forced to reside in foster care. She had 6 different foster homes whilst her mother was in prison and cried for her mother to come home. Eventually her mother was released but had nowhere to go. She ended up staying on the couch of various friends and was told that she could not be reunited with her daughter except for two 2 hour visits per week until she found suitable stable housing. Both mother and daughter were very distressed about the situation and little "Jess" schooling went down hill and her mother's mental health deteriorated. Eventually PNM assisted to help them get a small unit, through a housing agency and they were reunited after 3 months.

WE CAN'T DO IT ANYMORE!

The call came through as a function was about to begin on a freezing cold Saturday last winter, when the wind was howling and the hail was teeming down. "I'm sorry to bother you, but we don't have anyone else to turn to." The girl had been released from prison a month before.

As the details of her situation unfolded I felt sad and frustrated. She and her friend, who had also been released from prison several weeks before her, had not been given any assistance to access housing prior to her release. They had simply been told to turn up to a local emergency housing agency where temporary accommodation hopefully would be found for them. Over the past weeks they'd gone from pillar to post. At first they'd been distressed about their situation but now they had both become totally discouraged and depressed. They had called me because they had just turned up at the latest "rooming house" they'd been referred to.....only to find it had no beds, no bedding, was putridly dirty and the roof was leaking. I had trouble getting my mind around what the place would look like.

We spoke 6 different times throughout the afternoon as their phone kept dropping out. Late in the afternoon I managed to gather together a mattress (thanks mum and dad), a small TV and table, some bedding that I had at home and a broom to sweep up the mess in the room.



I arrived early that dark and dreary night and was stunned at what I saw. The two girls greeted me at the door of the seventy-year-old Footscray property, and one with tears in her eyes, virtually collapsed in my arms. "Loz, I can't do this anymore. We were better off in jail. At least in jail we were fed and warm." As we talked, and they unloaded all of what had gone on in the past weeks, they invited me to look at the room. I was shocked. How could it be that this house had not been condemned? The floor and walls were appallingly dirty, there was no heating and the window in the room didn't close. The rest of the house was occupied by all men, the kitchen was in unbelievably bad condition and the bathroom/shower area was a major health hazard.

I took the girls out for a meal and they unloaded more about how they felt. When we returned to the house, they swept their room and they gratefully accepted the bed and the few things I had.

I was sleepless that night, pondering their situation, so typical of many women exiting prison. The number one cause of anxiety for women in prison is undoubtedly having nowhere to go upon release. We have the conversation with women about it day in and day out. No safety, no security, nowhere to rebuild their lives and no one who cares. Some would say it's criminal. Their fear prior to release is often overwhelming. Children who are waiting to be reunited with their mothers often can't be, because their mother has no appropriate accommodation.

That night, and many other nights I have pondered on the passage in James 2:14-17.

"What good is it my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

At Prison Network Ministries we have decided that we can no longer ignore the most basic needs of these women and children we care about. In the coming months we have decided to act on this need, and intend to lease a unit for a woman and her children at a subsidised, affordable rate. The unit will be supported by PNM staff and volunteers, and will be linked with a local church that will provide additional support, friendship and assistance to help rebuild their lives. In return, the woman will be expected to give back in the way of service to the church. We know that women will be lining up to have such an opportunity. One Community Church in Blackburn has committed to partner with us in this first housing venture and we are delighted to have their support. Over time we hope to replicate the model in various areas around Melbourne. The cost will be substantial but we believe it could also be life-changing. A woman in prison commented to me recently with her voice breaking up, "That would be so fantastic. If I had had that sort of support, I'm sure I would never have come here. That's exactly what we need."

Our greatest challenge will be finding a place to rent. The area we intend to start with is the Box Hill/Blackburn/Mitcham area as those suburbs are close to One Community Church. Unfortunately, private rental is not an option due to unaffordable rates and our women are low on real estate agent 'preference' lists. If you would like to contribute financially or know of a unit we may be able to lease, then we would love to hear from you by phone or through our website.

Would you pray that we can get this up and running very soon? There are many cold months ahead.

Laurel Gore

BOARD MEMBER PROFILE

5 minutes with Paul Joy



I am married to Sharon and we have three children; Tyler (6), Abbi (4) and Charli (1). We worship at Mill Park Baptist Church. I've worked in various roles in Schools for 15 years including Primary School classroom

teacher, Chaplain at a Year 9 Residential Campus, various School leadership positions, CRE teacher and my current role as School Chaplain at Yarra Valley Grammar in Ringwood.

What's in your CD player at the moment?

The Wiggles, Story-time

Last movie you saw

Despicable Me – fundraiser at my son's school.

Most adventurous thing you have ever done

I spent 8 weeks riding an ex-postie bike across Africa with 2 mates. It was a fantastic way to explore the various countries and cultures we travelled through, interacting with the locals in the towns and villages that the larger tourist buses rumble straight through without stopping.

Name 5 people you would invite to a dinner party

Morgan Freeman, Rev Tim Costello, Oprah, Fr Bob Maguire, and David Koch.

What are some of your interests or hobbies

Jogging, Camping with family and friends, Coaching Auskick, Pottering outside at home.

Favourite holiday destination

Camping on the Rosebud foreshore.

Favourite bible verse or character

Jacob's son, Joseph.

Why did you join the Board

Following a long term interest in PNM I decided it was time to do my part. By joining the Board I hope to contribute in a constructive way behind the scenes and make a positive difference.

What is your hope for PNM?

That we'll continue to make a positive impact in the lives of women and families in great need, when most of society would turn their back. In this way, I hope and pray that we can be the face of Jesus for the women and families we minister to and care for.

OUR REGULAR PROGRAMS

Tuesday: Christian discussion group, sports/craft programs, visits

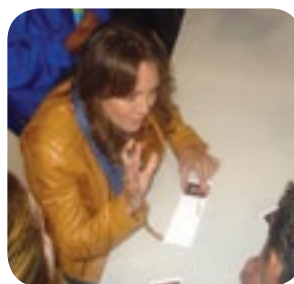
Thursday: Sports program and visits

Friday (three weekly): Tarra craft program

Saturday (four weekly): Sports event - 'Game on Day'

1st & 3rd **Sunday** of the month: Fun with Mum

4th **Sunday** of the month: Sunday Live



BIGGEST LOSER – GAME ON DAY

On Saturday the 7th of May we held our BIGGEST LOSER GAME ON DAY. This is the second time we have run this in the prison and this year we were fortunate to have

Michelle Bridges join us, from the hit TV show 'The Biggest Loser'. Michelle was great with the women and had a very humble nature about her.

Over 100 women came out to hear Michelle speak and there were even a few star struck officers. Michelle spoke to the women about self-confidence, nutrition and exercise, and at the end the women were able to ask her some questions. Michelle also went to Marmak, which is the mental health unit, and the Protection Unit. The women were extremely grateful that she made the effort to meet them.

Lots of fun and games were had by the women, who let their competitive sides come out and compete with other teams to win the overall competition. They enjoyed trivia rounds with questions focusing on health and nutrition, as well as physical challenge games. The women said that the day was great and that they'd all had great fun. One woman said, "Game On Days are the only time all us girls get together, put our differences aside and have fun....we love it."



The day was a real success and would not have been possible without our wonderful sports volunteers who came in and were a great help on the day.

Alex Cuss



Prison Network Ministries

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